



Response of William Major and Andrew McMurry

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We thank Roman Bartosch and Greg Garrard for their thoughtful and temperate critique of our introduction to a recent special issue of *Journal of Ecocriticism*. Their response contains a number of valuable insights about the roles of ecocriticism, the humanities, and teaching in the present and largely foundering academic archipelago, and we find much to agree with. They would also distance themselves from the discourse of apocalypticism and instead align with the go-slow approach of traditional literary inquiry and the life of the scholar—even the scholar whose watching and waiting has brought her to the unassailable conclusion that her kids and grandkids will not be able to similarly “lean and loaf” at their ease even if they do produce scholarship that fosters the “prismatic unpredictability of the classroom” (Bartosch and Garrard 2) upon which Bartosch and Garrard’s cautious optimism teeters. But more on pedagogy later.

First things first. We suspect that what most troubled Bartosch and Garrard was that we threw them—or, rather, their Call for Papers for a conference in Cologne¹—under the humanist bus. They return the favour, noting that we ourselves “behave like exemplary humanist scholars.” About that bus: these days, not many literary critics wish to be on it, let alone under it. Humanism, this middle ground philosophy that rejects transcendent references as much as it eschews baldly materialist ones, is out of fashion (although, as Bartosch and Garrard remind us, humanism can also embody an admirable notion of the humane and a pointed acknowledgement of our species’ fallibility). Some one-time humanists now prefer to style themselves post-humanists, a positionality meant to signal their disavowal of human arrogance, anthropocentrism, and essentialism, amongst other things. Posthumanists content themselves with a modest claim to plain citizenship in the commonwealth of species.

One unfortunate relic of humanism that we detect in many intellectuals may be said to fall under the rhetorical category of *stance* (Booth) or *attitude* (Burke). What does a humanist stance or attitude look like, intellectually speaking? Gramsci, as an example, suggested that one might do well to espouse a pessimism of the intellect but an optimism of the will. We think Bartosch and Garrard would probably approve of that stance, which we take to be an epitome of the humanist spirit of inquiry. Implicitly, this optative mood is considered upright, courageous, and indispensable.

Where we part ways with all humanisms most decisively is that we have abandoned this disabling rhetoric of the *hopeful spirit*. That is because we think that optimism of the will too often inhibits the operations of the intellect and the move to praxis. No surprise that hope happens: everything in our culture encourages us, as Monty Python had it, to look on the bright side of life. It seems to be one of the articles of secular humanist faith that what man has harmed he can, with a more reasonable, patient application of his intellect and moral compass, unarm. But we think this is just the hopeful spirit working its voodoo, turning vinegar into wine and frowns upside down.

Don’t take us wrong: it is not the arrogance of humanism we are talking about here; it’s the attitude of humanism. Give engineers a challenge, and they’ll roll up their sleeves and say, “let’s work the problem.” Engineers fervently believe in the techno-fix (what Bill McKibben calls “the defiant reflex”). What do humanists believe in? The dialogue-fix. We work the problem through the Socratic circle. In this scheme, there’s no time for hand-wringing, only tongue-wagging, which is our kind of *doing*. Now, if we humanists and posthumanists don’t like to think of ourselves as can-do pragmatists, that’s only because

we've been trained to imagine our penchant for *problematizing* and *complicating* signals our commendable skepticism, long-circuit thinking, and inclusivity. We don't panic; we dilate. We are useful eggheads: hard, not soft, boiled. In normal times, we can be quite endearing. But in a crisis, our very strengths may work against us. We become the know-it-all in the cinematic hostage scene who steps up to the gun-wielding villains, saying, "I am a trained negotiator. Let's all just take a deep breath. I'm sure we can work this out." We all know what happens to that guy.

We despair that one day homo academicus will wake up to find that what he thought was wisdom about the current crisis was nothing but willful blindness elevated to virtue. He will realize that he was not just a frog in a pot but a frog in a pot who thought he was St. Jerome in his study. Thus in their CFP Garrard and Bartosch wish to exclude apocalypticism and "environmentalist propaganda" from their cosmopolitan conference just as they would like to exclude it from "the daily practice of teaching the humanities and arts." This preference for the Burkean comic frame is consistent with Garrard's perspective, as announced in his influential primer, *Ecocriticism*. Tragic apocalypticism, he notes, polarizes audiences, plays into the media's preference for sensationalism, eliminates nuance and complexity, promotes villainization, and generally muddies the waters of rational debate. At its worst, the "rhetoric of catastrophism tends to 'produce' the crisis it describes, as in the Malthusian depiction of extreme poverty as 'famine'" (105).

These are important observations, and we go along with them to some extent. But not all the way. We maintain, against Bartosch and Garrard, that discourses of fear, foreboding, and pessimism are appropriate objective correlatives for the whirlwind of terrifying ecological facts we are confronted with daily. These latter must be engaged in their full horror, not blunted in advance by ratiocination. It is thus the safeguarding into reasoned equipoise that we object to, in the university and elsewhere. We believe Bartosch and Garrard are too quick to usher the Other of scholarly ethos and logos out the classroom door, and too ready to assume "catastrophe" is a concept that can be stipulated to and moved past, as if it is merely one more item in the lading-list of apocalyptic misfires, a distraction from the hard work of slow reading and slow thought. We say, "not so fast." Neither democracy or criticism are served by downplaying the palpable, chilling signals of environmental collapse. Granted, we have a long history of unrequited millennial expectations and apocalyptic doomsaying, stemming from a variety of traditions and dispositions. But to what end do we link our current ecological crisis with that kind of thinking? There is vast gulf between the Book of Revelations and 391 ppm of carbon dioxide, and we ecocritics know it. The conflation of ecocatastrophe and end-of-the-worldism has been the rhetorical gambit of right wing denialists and liberal Pollyannas alike; it does not serve ecocriticism well to say, "Tut, tut. Some people always believe the sky is falling; let's not lower ourselves to *that* discussion."

We believe that the stiff-upper lip, go-slow position costs us immensely. We believe that there is actually much to fear besides fear itself, that the quasi-official stance of optimism has its own risks. We believe that what remained in Pandora's jar after the evils escaped—i.e., *hope*--is no longer our friend but our enemy, a mischief in its own right that lets us lay off hard decisions onto futurity. We caution that the cerebral modulation of unmitigated environmental disaster is a mistake, a kind of preemptive quietism, politically speaking, part and parcel of a culture that overwhelmingly prefers the "feel-good" ending. It is speculated that the tragic frame enervates by overplaying pathos and melodrama, and perhaps it does. But so too does the comic frame, with its glass half-full approach, enervate by overplaying reason and composure.²

We turn now to ecocriticism and didactics. Ecocriticism is not special. We perhaps once thought it was special; we perhaps bought into the first wave critique of postmodernism that Bartosch and Garrard (and others) rightly identify as the-then proper response to pomo hyperexuberance. There was a gap, ethical and critical, and ecocritics sought—mostly successfully—to fill it. Yet the fact that ecocritical scholars privileged the biosphere they identified as a neglected area of literary critical intervention did not, we submit, make their work any more useful in terms of addressing the practical problems it raised.

Thus the abstractions of the postmodern, to which Bartosch and Garrard refer, are the real straw men now that early ecocriticism has come and gone and things are getting worse, and there's no way that they are going to get better, if reports from the UN Climate Change summit in Doha, Qatar, are to be believed. As of this writing, greenhouse gases emissions were at an all-time high in 2012, over 14 years after the Kyoto Protocol was adopted. But we already know this. We also know there's nothing, practically speaking, we can do about it.

Ecocriticism thinks it is special, and this is a problem. It has set itself up from its earliest days as attending, in ways that previous critical modes had not, to what had been mostly neglected in the *Weltanschauung*: places, ecologies, non-human others, and so on. It cultivated approaches to texts that thrust these entities into the view of fellow scholars, students, even the wider public in some cases. That ecocriticism has been successful in tending to that garden in the current global context is perhaps in its favor; we can say that although the world is not much less oblivious to its incipient demise since our kind of thing came into being, it could clearly be more so. We have done no harm, in other words, and there are certainly arguments to be made—and Bartosch and Garrard make them—that it's too soon to tell whether we've done some good. We'll just have to wait and see. But the very fact that ecocriticism possesses a *hard kernel*, an ethical center that cannot be overcome, that cannot be out-theorized, that cannot be postmoderned out of existence or rhetorically invalidated, and that center is its animating force...well, because that hard kernel tasks us, dogs us, we suppose we must acknowledge there is a disappointed liberal humanist in both of us, borrowing from Patrick Curry's useful recuperation of humility (qtd. in Bartosch and Garrard (4). And because ecocriticism has failed to live up to our expectations, because it begins to look, twenty years or so in, more or less like just another professional discourse among professional discourses (which it is), routinized into the low-stakes academic poker game, yes, for sure, this gives us pause.

Of course, the failure is in part our own; it is one of those unfulfilled humanist expectations, "how to change the world" and etc., the beliefs we may have had in graduate school about "discourse being practice," and that sort of blather. And we plead guilty to once believing that working out an *explication de texte* was just a step away from manning a barricade. Anyway, we *hoped* it was. We may as well have been New Critics, except that they had an audience. Between then and now, there have been too many conferences, too many papers, too many books, where the so very high stakes of a livable planet came down to "here's a new way to think about this" or "if we learn to talk about objects using these terms, the ones I have derived by running this poem through quantum physics and Lacan, then we might be able to reenchant the world, or heal the circle of life, or get our heads on straight..." Sounds a bit like a fairy tale, doesn't it, when you hear from a few feet back? Or some kind of ersatz New Age religion? Was this how L. Ron Hubbard started? But then he had charisma. To be sure, we like this kind of talk, don't get us wrong, and we've uttered it, too. But where is it going? Does it add up to something? Is it more than whistling past the graveyard? Bartosch and Garrard say, in effect, we're *paying it forward* to our students. Maybe so. We want to know more about how that process works, because if ever there was a time to ponder the question of literary criticism's relevance, it's right now. That is what our special issue was meant to consider.

Which leads us to Bartosch and Garrard's warnings about the downside of the "instrumentalising of literature (2). We concede the point full in the knowledge that the specters of Stanley Fish and David Horowitz hover behind us every time we bring politics into the classroom. Frankly, we don't know what literature is supposed to do, whether it is supposed to make us better or more ethical people, or whether it does this for our students, who seem to have their own problems. We also admit that it is simply impossible to teach and not preach, at least a little bit, which is why John Parham's idea to put our cards on the table seems about right, and certainly takes the starch out of the academic guessing game. No one has ever said to either one of us to stop preaching and, anyway, the books themselves, the literature that is not supposed to be instrumentalized, seem to do that quite well. If literature

“makes us better noticers of life” (Wood 53, qtd. in Bartosch and Garrard 3) and if books can potentially “bring the student into a singular and unpredictable encounter with otherness” (Bartosch and Garrard 3), then all the better, though we aren’t quite sure there aren’t other such encounters that will effect the same.

What brings us up short, however, and where we draw the rhetorical line (since there is no other), is in Bartosch and Garrard’s position, in citing the invaluable contrast between praxis and criticism, that

twinges of conscience and organisational ethics are not the same as theoretical scholarship with its prerogative for critical and thorough analysis, evidence and argumentative plausibility. If ecocritical practices were simply restricted to transforming scientific findings into environmental activism (as if those things always align) we would sell our competences remarkably short, and that is to say nothing, yet, about the responsibilities of being teachers. (3)

We think that such “twinges of conscience,” such as those referenced by Bartosch and Garrard (ASLE-UKI has gone vegetarian; SKYPE lectures and conference presentations), are actually as necessary as theoretical/critical investments. We think that we need more “twinges of conscience,” just as we devoutly acquiesce to the blandishments of “successful scholars[hip]” that whisks us around the globe. What’s wrong with conscience and ethics, anyway? “Theoretical scholarship with its prerogative for critical and thorough analysis, evidence and argumentative plausibility” (Bartosch and Garrard 3) is useless without them. No one is suggesting that we not think things through, that we not rigorously examine scientific and humanist claims, that we not utilize all the tools at our disposal in our criticism and teaching. This isn’t a Samuel Beckett play; we can do something, and to paraphrase Thoreau, this does not mean we have to do everything. We simply aren’t sure we know what to do, and that what we are doing is doing what we think it does. But we do know that more of the same has the potential for more of the same. Which is unacceptable. Which is immoral, too. And ours is hardly an “anti-intellectual attempt to play down the relevance of thorough analysis, interrogation, self-critique and constant negotiation of what we mean when we talk about saving the planet” (Bartosch and Garrard 4); we do not work for the FOX Network. We are, after all, “exemplary humanist scholars.”

It is in the realm of teaching that our diverse perspectives converge, and we are aware of the good work that Garrard has done in this realm. The CFP that struck the wrong note with us seemed, however, to immediately cancel the type of dialogue we are now having, albeit from afar. As we have explained above, we are little convinced that an apocalyptic consciousness—one tempered, of course, by the good breeding inherent to Doctors of Philosophy—undermines the obvious fealty to intellectual intercourse that ostensibly took place at the conference (though we have been to plenty of conferences in which nothing of the sort occurred). Thinking things through—as good as that makes us feel—hardly obviates what’s going on on the ground. Nor does an eye to the ongoing collapse necessarily “breach the topics’ complexity,” or manifest in “environmentalist propaganda” (Bartosch and Garrard 5). The “ethos of critical and democratic pedagogy” that Bartosch and Garrard undoubtedly support was, regrettably, shut down by the language of the CFP, which was itself an attempt to circumscribe the discourse it wished to enhance. And though we are sympathetic to their aim of not putting off participants from other disciplines who might “find it peculiar that ecocritics unashamedly propagate their agendas and personal views” (5), we can’t help but observe that perhaps the more salient point is that ecocritics at least know they have agendas whereas the trouble with some disciplinary scholars is that they naively believe they have none.

What we found, at any rate, was that the language of the CFP worked against the ecocritical discourse, to which we are all volunteers, and against us, as potential contributors, and thus it did damage to that hard ethical kernel that causes us to gravitate together. We suppose that we represent

those who have, for good or ill, “fall[en] into the mode of environmentalist propaganda” and “succumb[ed] to warnings and claims to catastrophic urgency” yet who are still wanting to “reconcile with an ethos of critical and democratic pedagogy.” We represent those who do not think catastrophic urgency must come to terms with the demands of pedagogy; we think, rather, that pedagogy—and criticism—must come to terms with the urgency of the catastrophe.

Finally, we—Thelma and Louise!—offer this poem by Emily Dickinson to contrast the ecocritical stance of Bartosch and Garrard, as they “bear patient witness—even to the crack of doom,” with our own, precarious perch over the cliff’s edge:

"Faith" is a fine invention
For Gentlemen who see!
But Microscopes are prudent
In an Emergency!

--Emily Dickinson

Endnotes

¹ Here is the full CFP for “Teaching the Environment: Transdisciplinary Perspectives”:

“We are looking for contributors to a transdisciplinary symposium on the didactical implementations of ecocriticism, critical animal studies and green cultural studies. a special emphasis on transdisciplinary perspectives, we would like to discuss how the tenets of these academic fields can be incorporated into the daily practice of teaching the humanities and arts – without either breaching the topics’ complexity, falling into the mode of environmentalist propaganda or succumbing to warnings and claims to catastrophic urgency which are hard to reconcile with an ethos of critical and democratic pedagogy.

We hope to enable truly transdisciplinary dialogues and therefore, we welcome teachers just as well as theoreticians from academia whose topics may comprise, but do not have to be restricted to, environmental and animal studies, green didactics, eco-composition, posthumanism, the sciences, and related fields. With this broad focus and the variety of topics that it allows, we hope to provide a basis for transdisciplinary connections in an inextricably interconnected world.”

² There is a grim joke that embodies this combination of deferral and denial so typical of contemporary culture: Doctor: I have some very bad news. You have inoperable cancer. Terminal. I estimate you have less than three weeks to live. Patient: I understand. I’ll be out of town this summer. Can we schedule the treatments to begin in September?

Works Cited

Bartosch, Roman and Greg Garrard. “The Function of Criticism. A Response to William Major and Andrew McMurry’s Editorial.” *Journal of Ecocriticism*.
Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*. London: Routledge, 2004.